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Letter from Linda Grace Hoyer to John Updike, October 9, 1950

Linda Grace Hoyer

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October 9, 1950
(Grandma's Birthday)

Dear John:

Your anxiety and the wish to return to the familiar thing (however unpleasant) and your impatience with assigned study is very like my college experience. Perhaps everyone feels a little that way. Afterwards, we look back to our college days as a time when we might have prepared for freedom rather than the loss of freedom which it is while you are there. At my age one begins to doubt the good of any freedom for the young, thinking most highly of discipline, hard work, and sundry other goodies to be taken in large doses during late adolescence. And I don't mean any of the bottled goodies. Oh no, they are strictly for the middle-aged. So, I can imagine that you feel trapped and permanently diverted from the career you could almost touch. In short, you probably are face to face with the reason why many really intelligent boys leave college without diplomas. College seems to be an instrument designed by the middle-aged to retard the young (to preserve their own jobs a little longer). That's all it is. But since the old are sitting squarely on all the good jobs, there's no better place to wait your turn than where you are. That's my completely unromantic view (or is it dim?) of college. Of course there no limit to the rationalizations a good parent or teacher will make to avoid meeting this ugly fact in the open. Being neither a teacher nor a good parent, I can say that college is one of the last places in the world you should go for an education. But who would believe me? Not even you, I hope, because the college degree is the rose that never fades, scenting the gutters of Plowville and the saloons of Philadelphia with the same indefinable fragrance and even if you never learn to write or draw you will always smell like a college graduate. And sometimes it seems to be better to smell good than to be good. Yes, I'm kidding. I think you can learn what you need to know in college. But it won't be easy. About five hundred of your classmates are boys who have been specially and deliberately prepared for their college work by good private schools. You, poor soul, shared your classes and teachers with Charley McComsey. The girls are beginning to boycott him, Daddy says. Doesn't know his own strength. Charley, that is.

It is easy to advise but I ~~X~~ know I'm not competent. Flunking Latin doesn't seem fatal, however, and if they keep you in this class, get a literal translation of whatever you are reading and exercise your English aptitude on it. The entertainment trio sounds good. But must you be worried about money at a time like this? How are the colds coming along? Pillowcases are on their way with all our love and best wishes.

Mother

So I threw it away and started again on the page following before this.

P. S. After reading the bulkier part of this missive, your father said: "I guess Johnny will understand it. You aren't usually so long-winded." Yes, I listened to one of grandpa and daddy's endless debates from about seven in the morning until seven last night. To be both confused and long-winded is the rule here, it seems. So, what I was really trying to say was that I am glad you are being subjected to a new variety of confusion. If you are smart enough, you may be able to escape this sort of thing altogether. Good luck.

I'm trying out your room as a place of escape into the fifteenth century. Somehow I can't get by Roy's cornfield. I cleaned out my file on Friday night while your pa and Mac went to Royersford with a busload of Shillington High and that is as close as I've come to "writing". If I knew exactly why your grandfather is so irritating to me, I might be able to understand some of my writing difficulty and do something about it. Hate, I suppose, is as deadly to the would-be writer as it is to every one else. And why should I find him so obnoxious when the rest of the family thinks he is a droll and fairly lovable character? And why, since ^{writing} it is so difficult and the results so poor, do I feel guilty about not doing it? And how much did the courses I had in college have to do with my incompetence? Has Mr. Miller expressed any theories on the relation between a writing career and sanity? Don't answer this. The fact that he tried to talk physics on you speaks for itself.

Mr. Eberly is having sale of his farms, machinery, and farm goods tomorrow. Wilma sat beside me in the movies on Saturday night and told me to tell you how proud of you she is. The early show in Shillington seems to be getting to be a habit again and I'm certainly glad. Going down Philadelphia Avenue with you and Daddy is one of the pleasantest memories I have. Dr. Hunter, by the way, has filled the yard (on Kachel's side) with red bricks. He is planning to have an office, they say, and take on some private practise. So far as I know, everybody who ever lived there was slightly addled (excepting my son who went to Plowville in the nick of time) and I shouldn't be surprised if the good doctor hasn't caught something too. At any rate, a projection on that side of the house should be an improvement to the general outline. It always looked to me as though the Shillings intended to build a double house and ran out of money when the east half was done. Clint would love to hear that, wouldn't he?

Write when you have time and take things one at a time. No one can look ahead four years and live. Love,

P & M